Daffodils

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Abstract

Daffodils is a 19-minute narrative comedy about two estranged siblings who reconnect over the course of a robbery-gone-wrong. When Martha falls into heavy debt following a break-up, she tricks her brother Frank, a reformed criminal-turned-locksmith, into helping her break into her ex-boyfriend's house to steal a precious family heirloom. As Frank uncovers the depth of his sister's financial and emotional troubles, he must reckon with the limits of his sibling loyalty.

The film projects comedy as a legitimate variation on the dramatic form, one that can be at once hilarious and heartfelt. Unlike the looser improvisational "hangout" comedies popularized in the mid-2000s, I wanted *Daffodils* to employ a more formal technique akin to the precise and meticulous works of filmmakers like Billy Wilder and Edgar Wright. Their films exhibit a distinct rhythm that is both comedic and incredibly cinematic. While I certainly don't wish to mimic their styles, I look to their oeuvre as a roadmap for finding my own.

As much as it is a technical exercise in the craft of farcical comedy, *Daffodils* is also a deeply personal exploration of loyalty, responsibility, and the redemptive power of family. Through the prism of a comically absurd situation, I wanted to reflect on my own insecurities relating to wealth and success, as well as my own limitations as an artist and a person. Ultimately, this film is meant to entertain, yet I hope it also speaks to a deeper truth about the efforts we must undertake in order to maintain the meaningful connections in our lives.

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“We have to laugh at our loss of dignity, which is what makes the constant recurrence of such losses bearable.” – Alan Dale

"The premise of all comedy is a man in trouble." – Jerry Lewis

“Merdre!” – Roi Ubu

Introduction

Frasier: Thanks, Niles. You are a good brother and a credit to the psychiatric profession.

Niles: You're a good brother, too.

(*Frasier, Season 01, Episode 02: Space Quest*)

There's something about this joke that exemplifies the complexity of the sibling relationship for me. Spiteful, jealous, merciless, yet casual, harmless and dare I say, sweet. Niles and Frasier may always be at odds, but their love for each other shines through. They throw these jibes *because* their bond is strong, *because* they know their relationship will endure. *Daffodils* is an homage to such a relationship. I wanted to explore the bonds of family and the sacrifices we are forced to make for them. Over the course of the film's nineteen-minute runtime, I show a protagonist whose loyalty to his sister is severely tested when her motives prove to be less than honourable. In Frank, we see a man who has left his criminal past behind, has built himself a home, a family and is now determined to fly right. In Martha, we see a desperate young woman in a situation that's about to go from bad to worse. Yet in spite of their difference, they are complicated people longing for a connection.

While none of this sounds remotely humorous, it did serve as the perfect emotional baseline for what would be an exercise in farcical comedy. Defining the genre was exceedingly difficult, namely because it sports so many definitions. Farce is a science, an artform, a piece of "cheerful, popular amusement" (Davis, p.327) and a "cruel, often brutal, even murderous [genre]" (Bermel, p.21). Its character venture wildly into unreality (Ibid, p.55). It features witty repartee, lowbrow slapstick and absurd misunderstandings, sometimes all at once. The word itself: "farce", which derives from the French word "to stuff" is perfectly indicative of the genre's ability to accommodate a myriad of formal and stylistic ingredients (Ibid, p.61). In the

end, farce is about making people laugh, and it was with that in mind that I began the process of making *Daffodils.*

As I crafted the film, I became equal parts artist and technician; a narrative clockmaker who ensured that each wheel, spring and bezel was perfectly calibrated to delight an audience. As a comic writer, I wanted to challenge myself to tell an emotionally resonant story that fit into an entertaining and technically proficient screenplay. I sought to pay off every narrative beat that the film introduces in the first act. As one can imagine, the road to making such a tightly plotted film was both arduous and time consuming. Many of the story arcs, character beats, and plot twists were rewritten, reimagined or just plain rejected.

I also endeavoured to make a film that challenged my propensity for the overly theatrical. Given my stage background, I have come to rely on dialogue as my primary storytelling tool. Where I needed to challenge myself was in utilising the visual grammar that sets cinema apart from its stage bound cousin. Crafting visual humour proved especially complex, especially in the staging and choreography of certain set pieces. I had to treat every beat like steps in a waltz, with my characters playing off each other in a manner that felt both comedic and natural.

What follows is an account of the making of *Daffodils,* from initial concept to picture lock. I begin with a look at genre cinema and the choice to make a comedy. I then present my background and creative process with specific emphasis on how it informed my decisions throughout production. I follow this up with a look at my impressions of modern comedy visuals and my desire to push the medium forward. I then dive into the script-writing process, detailing how the project changed over the course of a two-plus-year development period. Finally, I take the reader on a journey from pre-production all the way through to post-production, wherein I outline everything including prepping the look of the film, rehearsals, storyboards and editing.

Making this film was a huge undertaking. It tested my abilities as a filmmaker and offered a valuable lesson in the art of finding balance; between ambition and reality, instinct and reason, spontaneity and restraint. I hope that this paper offers an illuminating look at all of these elements and provides a compelling glimpse into my experiences.

1. Background

a) Comedy: A Genre Without Honour

If there is one thing that filmmakers hate, it is being labelled "mainstream." But what exactly does this mean? Critics of this genre (if it is a genre at all) view it as crass commercial entertainment; hack work made by journeymen filmmakers with little style or sense of authorship (Mairata, p.5). It is no surprise considering mainstream cinema tends towards convention; a three-act structure, the classic hero's journey, and broadly appealing themes. In a way, the critics are not wrong. Because it attempts to please a mass audience, it easily falls prey to cliché and formula. However, because of its potential pitfalls, mainstream entertainment is exceedingly hard to do well. It struggles even harder to be original and requires just as much vision, ambition, and technique as any other form of cinema. The same arguments can be applied to comedy.

Compared to "serious" cinema, comedies have historically either been maligned or ignored by critics, citing a lack of gravitas or socio-cultural weight. (Porter & Hunter, p.1). The only way a comedy becomes respectable is when it strives for more serious-minded content in addition to laughs. We need only look at Charlie Chaplin's most critically lauded work to prove such a point (Dale). This sentiment is best summed up by Saul Austerlitz, who remarks that:

> Comedy is mostly without honor. Too often, comedy is treated as the bastard stepchild of American film. Rarely nominated for Academy Awards, or accorded the respect of a thoughtful newspaper review, comedies are considered the most disposable product of an industry dedicated to producing alluring but insubstantial goods. Drama, whatever its deficiencies, is granted the respect culture lends to noble intentions. Comedies, meanwhile, are seldom treated with

the same deference bestowed upon the latest *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Austerlitz, xii)

Perhaps laughter leaves us too vulnerable, reducing us to childish impulses that we've been trained to bury under adulthood. Perhaps if humour is inherently unserious, then we as a society can't rightly take it seriously. It's a genre so quickly shrugged off as effortless, but to me, nothing could be harder to accomplish. I saw *Daffodils* primarily as an opportunity to prove that I could make a film that was both crowd-pleasing and worthy of the comedy genre.

b) Form Fitting: On Why I Chose Comedy

I like small stories that feel big, the kind where the stakes are huge for the characters, even if objectively they appear quite small and mundane. Comedy is an especially effective at getting this across. The genre finds its best footing when it contrasts the stakes with the characters' reaction to them. Take for instance the classic scene in *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* (1975), in which King Arthur faces off against the Black Knight. Even as his limbs are hacked off one by one, the Black Knight's confidence and steadfast belief in his impending victory over King Arthur never wavers. Here, the gap between the Black Knight's predicament and his reaction is massive. In theory, the larger the gap, the bigger the laugh.

For as long as I've been making films, humour has been a part of my work, even if it only serves to pepper the drama. In addition to its immediate pleasures, I find comedy my most natural point of entry into a story. From the very start of my Masters, I wanted my thesis to be a comedy. But where to start? Comedy is a broad term which includes parody, slapstick, surreal, satirical, dry, dark, highbrow, lowbrow; and those are just the two-syllable subcategories. Each contains its own rich heritage, and each is funny in its own right. Furthermore, most comedies tend to blend elements from each sub-genre, creating an even larger pool of possibilities.

I did not want to pigeonhole myself, but I also knew I needed a template from which to begin the writing process. That is when I settled on farce. Going back as far as Aristophanes, farce has been a staple of the art form (Bermel, p.38) and provides no shortage of comedic and dramatic potential. When I began studying farce more closely, I didn't fully appreciate just what I was getting into. Comedy, it turns out, is much like an atom; just when you think you've figured it out, you break it open and find a new universe of things to uncover. I pored over the literature, determined to find some simple overarching definition, a summation that would unlock the key to its understanding. It was an exhausting exercise, one that only led to more questions.

Eventually, I determined, in spite of its multifaceted nature, farce plays on one simple idea; information. Some characters have it, others do not. The tension comes from seeing the gap of knowledge play out in increasingly outlandish situations. Suspense film plays with a similar notion. Alfred Hitchcock popularized the now famous "bomb theory" (Bays, p.22). In suspense, the audience is privy to some danger that the characters are not (i.e. the bomb under the table). As time goes on, we squirm and scream because we cannot step in to save our characters from their fate. The tension builds to a breaking point until it is released. The same rules apply to comedy. The only difference is the intended reaction.

It is this audience engagement that impassions me most during the creative process. How a viewer will react to a moment or scene inspires me in virtually every creative decision. I cannot be sure exactly where this comes from, suffice to say that comedy is the ideal vessel through which I can channel my interests. Along with horror, comedy is far better experienced in a crowd. Unlike other genres, its barometer for success is clear. If the crowd laughs, the goal is met; the piece is successful.

Beyond my love for the form, I also see a dearth of well-made comedy in the English Canadian film landscape. Films like Michael Dowse's *Fubar* (2002) and Matthew Johnson's *The Dirties* (2013) are a rarity. If anything, comedy in English Canada has had a far better track record on the small screen, from narrative sitcoms like *Schitt's Creek* and *Made in Canada* to sketch shows like *The Royal Canadian Air Farce* and *Baroness Von Sketch.* Since comedy relies so much on repetition to create humour, perhaps it should not be surprising that comedy fares best on the small screen, which allows for long form storytelling. Short films risk greater failure than feature films, because they fall dangerously close to sketch, where the premise itself is the bulk of the content. I will cover sketch and how it differs from narrative comedy in the following section.

c) Artistic Background

In applying to this program, I wrote and directed a short comedy entitled *Floozy*, a seven-minute farce that served as a primer for my thesis. The tone, the feel and the characters were similar if not identical – I would even go on to cast Joe Amero as the lead in both films. The film taught me to distinguish short narrative comedy from filmed sketch comedy. Both use a similar dramatic construction, but sketch doesn't require an emotional arc. There are of course exceptions to every rule, but the majority of sketches rely on its ability to heighten a comedic premise. Playwright Kaite O'Reilly defines the term within the word itself: "sketch". In speaking about her writing students, she elaborates:

> The pieces they were writing were 'sketches' as the material was 'thin' – they had 'sketched in' mouthpieces, comedy stereotypes to deliver the material, which only existed to serve the punch line. They hadn't yet created complex,

three-dimensional characters who could be imagined to exist beyond the given scenario.

This final point is key, and very illustrative of my own work in *Floozy.* While the film suggests a larger world outside the "given scenario", its attempt at crafting well-drawn characters falls short. The protagonist, Francis (renamed Frank in *Daffodils)* is given very little characterization beyond his simple desire to enjoy a quiet morning. Even then, he seems to only exist for the premise. Very little can be gleaned in seven minutes, so even a 'proper dramatic narrative' has little time develop its characters. O'Reilly draws parallels between sketch and drama by quoting author Arnold Wesker, who warns writers about being too anecdotal. He claims that there is a stark difference between a story you can tell across the table at dinner and "material which resonates, carries meaning into other peoples' lives across time and frontiers." (qtd. by O'Reilly). While I share the view that sketch is far more anecdotal than dramatic, I do not want to downplay the difficulty involved in writing sketch. The form requires a deft understanding of timing, tone and stakes. The premise must be rock solid, efficiently delivered and immediately relatable, not to mention funny.

For the purposes of my thesis, I wanted to get away from the clean simplicity of sketch writing in order to access deeper dramatic material. Similar to how *Floozy* served as a lead-up to my thesis, I see *Daffodils* as a launchpad for a narrative feature film. With every iteration of this story, I build on the complexity of the characters, deepening their inner lives, forcing us to ask where they could go next. For instance, what are the consequences of Martha's theft at the end of the film? The questions brought up by the story not only justify a longer running time, they necessitate one. Farce is a simple idea filled to the brim with a series of increasingly complex moving parts. As a result, there's limited room left over (especially in a short) for character

growth. Still, with the specific goal of deepening my skills as a writer, I wanted to look at the short as a promise to my characters. There would be no way to give them an entire arc. Instead what I gave them was a sense of hope for the future, hope that change lay ahead. This achieved a dual purpose in not only setting up some larger project on the horizon, but also giving the audience a chance to imagine a deeper, richer world. When the lights come up after the credits, we are still wondering about these characters and their future adventures.

2. Script Development

a) Influences

From initial outline to final, the script for *Daffodils* took over eight months to complete. Before I even put pen to paper, I was intent on merging two major creative influences, the first being the witty, well-honed dialogue of comedy writers Billy Wilder and Francis Veber; the other from my time as an improviser in the Second City Training Program.

In the former, the stories are so expertly crafted that they feel more like the work of skilled comedy engineers than artists. When describing Billy Wilder's craft, Alfred Bermel speaks of "characters who get wound in coils of circumstance that tighten wickedly... Main plots [that] traffic in disguises, deception, and impersonation, which are hallowed staples of farce." (p.381). In his films, everything counts, and nothing happens by accident. I find no greater satisfaction than seeing that intentionality on screen. Much like a well-built piece of furniture, the story feels beautiful and practical in its construction. My ultimate goal is for audience members to re-watch the film and see that all the pieces were in places from the beginning. There is a risk there of course, as Bermel highlights, of making the work too programmatic, or unnecessarily emphatic (p.382). It can suck the life out of a piece of art.

Then, on the other side of the spectrum, there is improvisational comedy. Unlike the terse logic and efficiency of Wilder's scripts (Ibid, p.382), improv is looser, freer and driven by spontaneity. The joy is in the fear of the unknown. It requires presence, fearlessness and an immense amount of confidence. Just because I was writing something very precise did not mean I wanted to lose the inherent value of improv. When employed, it helps me abandon pretense, trust my instincts and not become too precious about my material. That said, improv can also

lead to a shapelessness that I wanted to avoid. In order to balance the two, I would need to deploy each method at the appropriate time.

b) Bad for the Heart, Good for the Art: A Look at Story Evolution

As with so many stories, this one was inspired by a breakup. An important relationship of mine had ended, and I wanted to untangle my feelings around it. Thankfully, as most comedy is derived from painful experience, it was not hard to find the humour in it. I felt I was channeling Billy Wilder, who was described as man who "kept the tragedy for himself and gave us all the humor." (Austerlitz, p.150) In the beginning, the plot of *Daffodils* concerned a young social climber named Francis who learns that his now famous ex-girlfriend had written a book, and that supposedly it was about him. Terrified about his reputation, he drags his exasperated brother Joe on a narcissistic and deeply misguided quest to discover exactly what she wrote. If George Hebert's adage is true, that living well is the best revenge, then Francis had never heard of it. While told through the prism of farce, I wanted the subject matter to be taken with the utmost seriousness. I hoped to use the lightness of the genre as a Trojan horse to explore the feeling of inadequacy we feel when our ex-partner seems to be doing far better in life than we are.

The premise felt strong; I knew the story I was after. Then, forty-five pages later, I hit a wall. I realized that I had spent most of my page count attempting to justify why someone would go on this journey. I bent over backwards to contrive a plot that I simply could not contain in a short film. It was simply too ambitious. Whether it was fear or just plain good sense, I decided to change course. For this, I owe my cohort and professors a great deal of credit. They showed me that the film was stuck, not because of the premise itself, but rather because the characters were not in service of said premise. They made me realize that in order to properly tell Francis' story, I would need to involve his brother Joe. However, if I did that, there would be a problem. The

film's themes would shift from familial loyalty to brotherly competitiveness. Compelling as it may have been, this was not a topic I was particularly invested in.

So, with a renewed sense of purpose, I changed the focus of the story, swapping out the search for a book to the search for money. Simpler and clearer, this change reminded me that film's motivating object, or MacGuffin, is insignificant. As long as said object advances both plot and character, it could theoretically be anything. In this case, the story here was not really about the money, it was about Joe's relationship with his brother. Money is a strong motivator, but the real prize – the crux of the film – is reconciliation. At last, I was back on track. The story was set, and the road ahead looked clear. Then I lost my protagonist.

c) Lost and Found

Heading into my initial outline for *Daffodils*, I believed that Francis was my protagonist. His goal was straightforward; he would try to steal the book, and his brother Joe would act as his foil. But now, with a change of story direction, this structure did not feel right. Each iteration of the script would improve the dynamics between my leads, but they did not solve a key problem: which of the two siblings was now my protagonist? Was it Francis, the desperate thief who is tricked his brother into committing the crime? Or, was it Joe, the ex-convict older brother who is forced into committing a crime? For a moment, I considered the possibility of multiple protagonists, only to quickly realize my mistake. Sitcoms use a serialized form of storytelling that can accommodate an ensemble. Individual episodes can focus on a secondary character, fleshing them out and creating a fully formed cast of lead characters. To attempt multiple protagonists in a film was the wrong choice. To do so in a short film was doubly unreasonable. I scrapped the idea and went back to square one. What seemed so clear in previous drafts was now murky and unfocused.

Eventually, I returned to the central theme of the story, i.e. the healing power of family. Then, all I needed to figure out was who stood the most to lose based on that theme. A few drafts later, the answer came to me. It was Joe. Here was a man with a criminal past who had turned his entire life around. Now, he sees his younger brother Francis on the verge of making a terrible mistake, one that could cost him dearly. Joe may have escaped a life in prison, but he still bears the scars, and the last thing he wants is to see his only brother go down the same path. This felt like the right emotional journey for these characters. With the stakes now dramatically altered, I made my choice. I felt I had a solid grasp on my characters and as far as I was concerned, I was ready to turn in a final draft. Anyone who has seen the film will know how wrong I was.

d) Sibling of Mine

Once again, the problem I encountered was with Francis. Until draft ten, the central conceit still revolved around our male hero desperate to find out what his ex-girlfriend wrote about him. I was focusing on similar themes to what Preston Sturges explored in *Unfaithfully Yours,* namely that of men and their relationship with financial and sexual success. According to the writer/director, "men despair because financial and sexual success are linked but never synchronized." (Dale, p.169). The book that Francis pursues represents this disconnect, and his inherent "maleness" felt irretrievably connected to the story. But when I changed the MacGuffin to money, the specificity of Francis' gender seemed less important. Suddenly the premise of comedy as a "man in trouble" became more metaphorical than literal. Without the thematic ties to a specific gender, I felt like the possibilities for Francis' character were wide open.

Then, during the casting process, I met Joe Amero's sister, Maggie Cook. Here was Joe's actual sibling, who happened to be a gifted actress completing her fourth year of undergrad at York. I immediately saw a fabulous opportunity to cast these two as my leads, playing not only

characters I had written, but perhaps bringing some authenticity that I could never come up with on my own. In hindsight, the idea seems inspired, but at the time, I was terrified of making the switch. Simply put, I could not be sure if their real-life chemistry would translate to the screen. The risk felt big, but I tried not to overthink it. I was reaching a deadline and could not hold off making a decision this important. Furthermore, I needed to take risks. Plus, if there was ever a time to take a wild swing, it was now. And so, Francis became Martha, and Joe became Frank.

e) Stupid Courage

Writing a script is a lot like assembling a Rubrik's Cube; rearrange one piece and everything else moves with it. Changing the MacGuffin from a book to money caused me to change protagonists. Changing protagonists caused me to turn Francis into Martha. Turning Francis into Martha left a hole in the script, namely Martha's characterization. In *Floozy*, I felt I had given the Martha character short shrift. She served her purpose, but with such a short runtime, she also felt two-dimensional, especially compared to Frank. I knew I did not want to repeat the same mistake twice. So, for help, I turned to legendary screenwriter, the late William Goldman.

In an interview with the Writer's Guild Foundation, Goldman spoke of his favourite type of character beat, known as stupid courage (WGF). That he was especially moved by characters who commit acts of bravery no matter the difficulty. Drawing from author Miguel de Cervantes and his novel *Don Quixote*, Goldman espouses on the power of a hero who sees that the odds are against him and acts anyway (Ibid).

When I came across this quote, I immediately identified with it. All of the influences I have listed come packed with character moments, some big, some small, that are exactly as Goldman described. As I combed through the script for *Daffodils*, I realized that this was what

Martha was lacking. So, I set about giving her a moment of "stupid courage". In the final reel, we find Lloyd, the antagonist, threatening to call the owner of the house (and Martha's ex), Barry. Originally, I had Frank simply fake an injury to distract Lloyd. Then I saw an opening; what if I gave Martha an opportunity at redemption? She had spent so much of the film causing problems, how great would it be to see her pull of a heroic act, even if that means getting caught. I had Martha sacrifice herself by hurling a book against a wall in order to save Frank. Following the previous fifteen minutes of build-up, seeing Martha shed her selfishness and exhibit some stupid courage felt earned, cathartic and yes, moving.

3. Process

a) Improv and Casting

In the past, I did not spent much time intellectualizing my creative practice. I saw each project as an opportunity to try something new, and by never codifying my process, I believed I could let it evolve naturally. However, in the context of an academic program, I began to take stock of how I worked. For example, I knew I wanted to continue my habit of writing for certain actors. As was evidenced in my short film *Floozy*, I was very specific about casting Joe Amero as my lead character.

Prior to my time at York, I was part of an improv troupe called the Pepperoni Pizza Cats, which was formed in the Second City Longform training program. Through improv, I was able to form strong connections both personal and professional with a number of talented performers. This also served as the perfect casting session. With no pretense, I could get a sense of each actor's strengths and determine which roles would best fit them. Most importantly, I could glean their attitudes as individuals and feel far more confident casting them in my projects. Still, these pre-established relationships are not enough. There needs to be time dedicated to building trust between the actors, the director and the material. This is primarily why I hold extensive rehearsals. It is an essential part of my creative process and one I enjoy greatly. Gifted with the luxury of time as well as having built my cast early on, I met with Joe, Maggie and Geoff once a week for a month and a half. This gave them the chance to familiarize themselves with their roles as well as learn some of the film's more intricate choreography. More importantly, it gave us all time to get better acquainted and gain that much-needed trust.

b) Status and Politics in Comedy

In earlier drafts of the film, I intended to make a more overtly political film. In my application, I submitted a story about a man who tries to get the immigrant family next door kicked out so that he can take over their far nicer apartment. Not particularly subtle, it was a compelling story and one I am still keen on telling. However, much like the "book story", it did not feel right as a short film. Plus, I was not confident that I could successfully combine a straight-forward genre piece with these weightier topics. When I made the switch to a more classic burglary-gone-wrong plot, I gave up these political overtones. In return, I received something far subtler, if not as clearly defined. I am speaking of the battle for status between Frank and Martha.

In farce, nothing is more important than status. It is arguably the bread and butter of all good comedy. Status: who has it? Who does not? How far are people willing to go to get it? From there, concerns of class disparity inevitably arise. In many great comedies, the central tension comes from the divide between the haves and the have-nots. Historically these films have sided with the latter. Whether it is *A Night at the Opera* (1935), *The Ruling Class* (1972) or *La Grande Bouffe* (1973), there is a long tradition in farce to "[take] the smugly successful and eminent down a few pegs." (Bermel, p.46)

To me, the conflict in *Daffodils* treads on similar dramatic grounds. Take Frank for instance. He has managed, in spite of his criminal past, to turn his life around and live a stable lower-middle-class lifestyle. He is hardly rich but when considering the setbacks he has experienced over the years, he is a model of success. Then there is Martha, who has lived her whole life with the pressures of being the perfect child, and never living up to those expectations.

There is little backstory on Martha's motivations, but the film is designed with all the clues in place. Her relationship with Frank, with Barry, with her mother – they all point toward a complicated relationship with success. At one point, Frank reminds her that she "wasn't supposed to be the screw-up here." For someone like Martha, that kind of undue pressure explains a lot. Ironically, the expectation put on Martha has yielded a certain resentment on Frank's part. At the start of the film, he admonishes her fussiness and yuppy elitism. There is a certain paternalism at work here, as if Frank is only okay with her success as long as it happens by his standards.

Ultimately, *Daffodils* is not a polemic on class disparity. It is a piece of entertainment that happens to play with some heavy topics, including materialism, criminal reform and family dysfunction. These are never dealt with head-on but are instead presented as undercurrents subtly informing these characters and their behaviour. I do not wish to exclude this film from a political conversation. Quite the opposite in fact; I hope the film engenders discussion on a number of issues. For this, I believe my job is to leave viewers with enough room to interpret the material themselves.

c) A Word or Deux on Bilingualism

While it did not feature in any drafts of the script, I do wish to touch upon my interest in language. When I first applied to the program, the original title of my prospective thesis was *Serrures.* The film was to feature three characters would all speak a different language and as a result are always at odds. The film would have shown the consequences of miscommunication and the way language divides as easily as it unites. Additionally, it was to be a continuation of the work I had done in *Entrain*, a short I co-directed back in 2014. I saw the film as an opportunity to explore my identity as a French-Canadian, something that I had only touched on

in previous films. I wanted to use this apartment story as a means to delve into my fear of being trapped in a world that does not speak your language, both literally and metaphorically. Once I gave up the apartment story, the multilingual angle did not fit the new sibling narrative that I was pursuing. Looking ahead, I fully intend to come back to this topic and give it the treatment I believe it deserves.

4. Building a Framework

a) The State of Modern Studio Comedies

We are now in the age of peak criticism. Twitter, podcasting and YouTube are what primarily shape the filmmaking discourse for younger generations. Art is no longer consumed in a vacuum. A piece of film criticism can prove to be just as influential on storytellers as the film being criticized. Whether on social media, in think pieces, video essays or making-of featurettes, we are able to learn more about mediatic content than ever before. Our endless dissection of art may have its drawbacks, but it is also hugely helpful in contextualizing it within the broader cultural conversation.

Edgar Wright, one of my biggest influences, is considered the ultimate filmmaker's filmmaker. His work, constructed with great attention to detail, appeals to this culture of endless critical dissection and analysis. As a result, when I was prepping *Daffodils*, I was not only able to analyze Wright's films, I was able to analyze the countless video essays which have broken down his technique. One in particular was Every Frame A Painting's *How to Do Visual Comedy.*

Tony Zhou and Taylor Ramos track the evolution of English-language comedy and its effect on cinema's visual literacy. He claims that as film comedy has moved further toward an improvisational style, it has lost its visual appeal (How to Do Visual Comedy*)*. They cite numerous modern American studio comedies, highlighting that while they may contain funny dialogue, they are visually bland. He brings up Edgar Wright as one of the few "cinematic" comedy directors. When viewing his work, we see how Wright avoids the drab flavours of modern studio comedy in favour of more deliberate and stylized compositions, planting visual jokes as often as possible.

In fact, his humour comes off as a cross between the gag-heavy Zucker/Abraham/Zucker comedies (ZAZ-coms) and Monty Python. As an avid student of comedy, I found the essay incredibly informative and influential. Its insight helped solidify my intent to employ a similarly classical style in my own work. In their Filmstruck essay entitled *Howard Hawks and the Art of Screwball Comedy,* Zhou and co. establish that in order to create a sense of speed and chaos, they had to be both "deliberate and clear." (Filmstruck, 2018). I share both Wright and *Every Frame A Painting's* view that modern studio filmmaking has lacked compelling visuals for decades now. The question is why?

b) Under the Influence: A Brief History of Improv in Comedy Cinema

As I see it, the trend began with television and the explosion of improv-driven comedy. For over half a century, sitcoms acted more like stage productions, featuring theatrical dialogue, scenic sets and artificial lighting. Actors for the most part did not improvise their lines. By the late 90s, laugh-track-laden sitcoms like *FRIENDS* and *Seinfeld* were no longer pushing comedic boundaries. Then, in the early 00s, show like the American remake of *The Office* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* brought about a new, looser rhythm of comedy. These shows were often shot on location and featured mostly natural (or natural-looking) lightning. Blending the Second City-style of longform improv with the mockumentary aesthetic of Christopher Guest comedies, actors could write and rewrite entire scenes on the fly. From their onset, these shows were a breath of fresh air in the television comedy arena. Plus, with lower production costs, networks could continue renewing them in light of dwindling viewership.

Meanwhile, cinema had its own history with improv-based comedy. Films like *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Best in Show* utilized improv as an approach to writing, but these were cult films reserved for a niche audience. In Hollywood, superstar clown-creators like Bill Murray, Jim

Carrey and Adam Sandler were able to improvise thanks to loosely plotted narratives which entirely revolved around their personae. Yet, this rarely extended to the supporting cast. Aside from the films of Christopher Guest, fully improvisational cinema was a rarity in comedy. Then, around the boom of improv-heavy single-camera sitcoms, the style exploded in American cinema. Performers like Steve Carrell, Sasha Baron Cohen and Tina Fey transitioned to film and brought their bags of tricks along with them.

Talented and influential as they were, they would be nowhere without one man: Judd Apatow. He stands alongside Charlie Chaplin, Woody Allen and Ivan Reitman as one of cinema's defining comedy directors, having moulded the comedic sensibility of an entire generation (Martin). His debut feature, *40-Year-OId Virgin* (2005), with its mix of "no-holds barred raunch, discreetly rendered emotion, and bromance" (Austerlitz, p.370) became the template for the modern Hollywood studio comedy. In only a decade, he has produced a number of cultural touchstones like *Anchorman* (2004) and *Bridesmaids* (2011), helped launched the film careers of countless comedians like Seth Rogen and Melissa McCarthy, and to this day stands only second to Ivan Reitman as America's highest grossing live-action comedy filmmaker[1] (Box-Office Mojo).

In films such as *Knocked Up* (2007) and *40-Year-Old Virgin*, we see Apatow casting not physical comedians like Jim Carrey or Robin Williams, but rather laidback improvisers like Jonah Hill and Paul Rudd, whose styles depend more on witty verbiage than physical humour. Knowing what he was working with, Apatow perhaps inadvertently established a visual template, one that eschewed complex and deliberate camera moves in favour of static wides or slow-gliding dolly shots. With such an emphasis on dialogue, comedies became more visually

[1] These statistics include all production credits (Box-Office Mojo)

akin to television sitcoms. *Every Frame A Painting* makes this clear with modern comedy's use of establishing shots. Whereas a creative comedic director like Edgar Wright would have taken advantage of a scene transition to make a joke, mainstream American comedies employ the journeyman technique of stock footage establishing shots and nondescript pop songs. The result? Nothing stands out and the opportunity for humour is lost (How to Do Visual Comedy).

This is not to say that these films are without merit. If anything, directors Judd Apatow and Adam McKay shaped their films around the talent they had, and often to hilarious effect. After all, a director must first and foremost adapt to the material. To push against it is a clash of form and content. At the outset, I was determined to avoid the overly improvised, Apatow-ian approach to comedy; the types of films that an audience could just as soon follow with their eyes closed. Then I went ahead and hired improv actors for my film. The irony was not lost on me and the balancing between the two was difficult. More on that in the next section.

5. Pre-Production

a) Rehearsals

Whether theatrical dialogue or slapstick choreography, I like precision. The script for *Daffodils* was evidence of this. However, I could not cast talented improvisers and simply ignore their talents. The big question at the outset was this: could I merge the Edgar Wright with the Judd Apatow? The precision with the improvisational? The tight choreography with loose riffing? Would a new style emerge as a result, and if so, how would it dictate the film's visuals, tone and pacing? My one rule was to iron out these decisions in rehearsals. Even if I couldn't answer these questions completely, at least I could arrive on set with purpose and intention. During pre-production, I allowed my leads to play with the material. Changes to dialogue were welcome as long as they a) respected the emotional truth of the character and b) were funnier than what I had written. This proved easy with Joe Amero (Frank) and Geoffrey Cork (Lloyd), whose improv backgrounds were ideal for this kind of exploration. It proved harder with Maggie Cook (Martha), as her classical theatre training did not lend itself as well to improv. I needed to find an equilibrium.

Having the extended rehearsal period was key. It allowed us the time to try out ideas, utilize what we liked and abandon what did not work. Luckily, I had inadvertently written characters whose personalities reflected Maggie and Joe's actual acting styles. Maggie was controlled, whereas Joe was loose. Still, it was difficult. Much of Joe's creativity was marvelous, but there were times when it yielded diminishing returns. I had to keep Joe engaged in the project while also making sure he stayed focused on the story itself. Maggie, on the other hand, was always consistent, proving the intrinsic value of classical training. I only realized it in the cutting room, but she anchored the film. Between the three cast members, her part was the most

complex, having to calibrate deceit, heartbreak and fear while assuming the "funny-man" role in her comedic duo with Joe. My challenge in directing her was to reign in the stagier side of the performance. Geoff on the other hand brought his own style to the proceedings, almost blending Joe's off-the-cuff spontaneity with Maggie's more studied approach.

I knew I had to embrace the style of each actor, but their inherent theatricality would not play well on screen. As a strategy, I took the advice of my supervisor and filmed the actors delivering an improvised monologue. I began by framing them in a wide shot. As they spoke, I would slowly zoom in without their knowledge. Once they had finished, I would show them their performance and how camera placement affected their delivery. It showed the power of a close-up and proved the old adage of "less is more." The method proved immensely useful, as I was able to refer back to it throughout the shoot. It also allowed me to devise a visual style that serviced both the performances and my vision for the piece.

Nonetheless, there were moments when the two elements clashed. My shots were ambitious, often involving very technical multi-part dolly moves. The crew, even one as talented as this, needed time to get them right. Actors like Maggie and Geoff were used to the process. Joe, however, was not. He grew visibly frustrated with the repetitiveness of the shoot. In an effort to stave off boredom, he would change the lines, add to them, or sometimes just plain stop the take when he felt he was not delivering a quality performance. This made cutting around his performance excessively difficult compared to Maggie. In fairness to Joe, it is very challenging for an actor with little on-camera experience to withstand the gruelling process of a shoot. In the end, he was hard working and delivered a quality performance (look no further than the final set piece between him and Lloyd). It is also the drawback from hiring improvisers, who are not used to repeating themselves. It is the reason Edgar Wright does not cast them. Instead, he hires

trained film actors who are familiar the incremental process of shooting. In future, I would work toward better adapting my style to fit the story, not vice versa.

b) Creating the Look

There is a wonderful scene in Hal Ashby's classic *Being There* (1979) which served as the major visual reference for me and my cinematographer. The scene in question takes place early in the film, in which the main character Chance (Peter Sellers) sits next to his suddenly deceased benefactor. Ashby's camera is static, placed far back so as to reveal Chance's tiny frame next to the bed which has now effectively become an open casket. Cinematographer Caleb Deschanel adds to the funereal atmosphere by contrasting cool blues and static greys with white light pouring in through the window. As the next twenty minutes play out, Deschanel repeats the process, turning the house into a mausoleum, a requiem for a dead king and his now master-less servant. It is dark, somber, and hilarious. This contrast of style and tone was how I wanted to make *Daffodils*. I was determined to avoid the trap of sitcom-lighting visuals, which prioritize performance, but do not add anything to the storytelling. *Being There* is one example of a film that wholeheartedly avoids this pitfall, being both humorous and visually compelling.

c) In Defense of the Sitcom

While I stand by my criticisms of the television sitcom and its decidedly uncinematic qualities, I happily admit that I would not be making this film without the influence of *Frasier*, *Seinfeld* or *The Office*. These shows, two of which employ the dreaded laugh-track, are brilliant examples of the form. Beautifully written, acted, and directed, they exhibit a mastery of colour and lighting. In fact, I could spend an entire thesis on *Frasier's* evolving colour schemes over the course of its eleven seasons. These sitcoms contain stunning production design which immerse us into the world, even if, like Seinfeld are making no attempt at masking their theatricality. For

the past half-century, legendary sitcom director James Burrows has been responsible for some of the greatest half hours of North American television (including the shows mentioned above). As such, I would be remiss not to acknowledge both him and the writers of these shows as major influences on my own craft.

d) A Game of Tones

Establishing a tone is one of the most difficult parts of the filmmaking process. Knowing the parameters of the genre you're tackling certainly helps. Similar to directors such as Ari Aster and Edgar Wright, I believe in telling very personal stories through the rigid conventions of genre. Whereas the previous two filmmakers utilize horror as their genre of choice, I propose that comedy, and in particular farce, offers an equal potential to get away with more extravagant tonal choices.

In the Farrelly Brothers 1998 farce *There's Something About Mary*, we are immersed in realistic vision of late-90s Florida. Yet, the rules by which the film plays are often so bizarre they border on fantastical. In the infamous zipper scene, the protagonist Ted (Ben Stiller) gets his genitals caught in the fly of his trousers. The scene's inciting incident is ridiculous, but it is also grounded by Stiller's all-too relatable performance. However, as the scene progresses, the situation becomes more outlandish. First, the stepfather (Keith David) enters to offer a helping hand, followed by the wife. Then, a police officer inexplicably appears at the window sill. By the end of the scene, the bathroom is crowded with random strangers gawking at Ted's misfortune.

By now, we have officially left the real world and entered the theatre of the absurd. Yet, we as an audience do not care because of Stiller's performance. In life, this would never happen (one would hope, at least), but the Farrelly Brothers understand the difference between real life and fiction. To achieve laughs, they push the scene into the surreal and thus externalize how Ted

must be feeling inside. We empathize with his embarrassment because of how deftly the filmmakers move the needle from the real to the metaphorical, the tragic to the hilarious. When discussing his first feature, *Hereditary* (2018), writer/director Ari Aster describes genre as "[allowing] filmmakers to tell stories that would otherwise be too punishing for an audience" (Kinowetter). As long as the rules established at the start are respected, a film can get away with mostly anything. Even though Aster is referring to horror, I believe the same applies to a comedy like *There's Something About Mary.*

For *Daffodils*, I used this ethos as my tonal guidepost. In the film's final set piece, Frank maneuvers Lloyd away from Martha so that she can make her escape. The scene plays out like old vaudeville, wherein the rules of the physical world are stretched to fit a comedic goal. In *Every Frame A Painting*'s video essay on the great Buster Keaton, they speak of the comedian's use of space to establish reality. In his films, the characters only know as much about the world as the camera reveals (Every Frame A Painting). For example, Keaton won't know that a train is near until it is literally barrelling past him in frame. While hardly realistic, audience members go along with it because these physical laws are properly set up and respected throughout. I set out to do a similar thing. Like the *The General* (1926) or *There's Something About Mary*, we accept that Lloyd cannot hear or spot Martha because in a way, the audience accepts that this is a heightened reality.

e) The Power of Expectation

There is always a fine line between genre expectation and genre subversion. In her treatise on comedy, Jessica Milner Davis states how important it is to establish for the audience what genre we are entering into because it primes them for an expected experience. She writes about the "play-frame", a comic label that sets up what kind of humour they should prepare for

(p.328). In comedy, we use the rigid forms of genre to both excite the audience and ease them into accepting a transmogrified version of reality. Plus, it offers a framework for the writer which can then be subverted. Here we have two seemingly opposing viewpoints. Expectations versus subversion.

On the one hand, I want to understand how comedy works. I want to break it down into its component parts then reassemble it in my own image. This way, the genre stays fresh and exciting. On the other hand, I do not want the audience to feel like I am above the genre I am tackling. I still want to pay off the tropes that I have come to love. In the case of *Daffodils*, these include the misunderstandings, the masquerading, the charade, the big scheme, etc. As both a creator and lover of genre cinema, it all comes down to finding the right balance between expected payoffs and fresh narrative twists. What counts above all is a strong story and compelling characters. The rest should all hopefully fall into place.

f) Shaken Not Stirred, or How to Make a Genre Cocktail

In the commentary track for *Hot Fuzz* (2007), director Edgar Wright and cinematographer Bill Pope discuss the issue of genre blending. When they set out to make an action comedy about police officers, they were faced with a very particular challenge; how to balance the tone of their action influences with the requirements of comedy. In the former, they drew from Michael Bay, Tony Scott and Kathryn Bigelow; films with copious amounts of contrast-heavy lighting, kinetic editing and extreme camera angles. Many of their seminal works also employ the ultrawide 2.39:1 aspect ratio to intensify the drama. Flip to comedic cinema and you will find virtually none of these traits.

Even films like *Being There* or *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988), with all their visual panache tend to favour simple camera setups so as to complement the performance of the actors. Look no

further than Buster Keaton or Jackie Chan, whose visuals and editing rhythms are driven by clarity over freneticism. However, in the case of *Hot Fuzz*, much of the humour stems from parodying non-comedic action films. The filmmakers clearly put in time looking for the right balance of tone, one which would mimic the action styles they admired while still leaving space for comedy. Drama obscures whereas comedy reveals. Tension in the former is drawn from what we do not reveal, whereas in the latter it is drawn from the opposite. Herein lies the ultimate schism between the two genres and why it was so difficult for Wright et al. to develop a cohesive style that serviced the demands of both.

A classic example of successful genre mixing is Mel Brook's *Young Frankenstein* (1974), which has been a major inspiration for me. When setting out to the make the film, Brooks chose to emulate the look and feel of 1930s Universal monster films. In doing so, he most likely encountered a similar hurdle that Edgar Wright faced in *Hot Fuzz;* how to be funny when emulating a genre that isn't supposed to be. What these filmmakers both demonstrate is that instead of pushing against the style being parodied (action, horror), it needs to be embraced. The more authentic the film looks, the funnier it becomes. In my case, I was blending farce with elements of a trapped-in-a-house thriller. I needed the latter to look convincing, so for visual reference, I looked to the horror and suspense genre as much I did traditional comedy films.

Whether it is comedy/film noir in *The Big Lebowski* (1998), comedy/documentary in *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) or comedy/western in *Tampopo* (1985), there is a thrill in whipping up a genre cocktail. When pulling from outside one's chosen genre, the film can take on unique qualities that might otherwise not exist. There is a sense of challenge and discovery to blending styles, finding the overlap between them, what works and what does not. In hindsight, I realize that *Daffodils* falls more into the camp of straight-forward comedy drama. The influence from

other genres is more subtle, found in the margins of some of the film's comedic beats. For instance, I used the language of suspense from the kitchen scene in *Jurassic Park* (1993) for the sequence of Lloyd entering the house. There are no obvious connections to Spielberg's horror/adventure classic, but watching the scene in *Daffodils* more closely, I believe the influence is clearly present.

g) Boxed In: On Aspect Ratio

On the subject of choosing an aspect ratio, I once again ventured outside the comedy genre for inspiration. To start, I looked at my characters and their state of mind throughout the film. Once they enter the house, they are trapped. Yet, for reasons made clear later in the story, they also feel lost within it. It is a place that neither Martha nor Frank recognize anymore. That equal sense of claustrophobia and expansiveness was my starting point, and in films like Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Army of Shadows* (1969), I found a similar sensibility through their use of the 1.85:1 aspect ratio. They also serve as great examples on how to create a relationship between the characters and the space. They are also not comedies.

My point here was not to avoid the genre itself. Quite the contrary, I looked at countless comedies, many of which also employed the standard 1.85:1 aspect ratio. This look outward was about bringing new ideas to the table. In a feature-length version of *Daffodils*, I would continue to source from other genres in order to craft scenes. What can the tone of a Sam Peckinpah showdown teach me about how to craft a break-up scene? What can the staging of a Merchant-Ivory period piece inspire in a horrifying execution? Behind these questions lies more than a gimmick. Much like the choice of aspect ratio, there is an opportunity to build on the past, to find unexpected ideas, and to create new storytelling methods.

h) Coverage and How to Plan a Shoot

In his book *Steven Spielberg: Style by Stealth*, author James Mairata explains how the director drew his influences from old Hollywood directors like Michael Curtiz and Victor Fleming (p.6o). In order to thrive in the old studio system, these filmmakers devised methods to cover entire scenes in master shots, "often with deep space compositions – in an inherently visual and temporally efficient way that enable tight shooting schedules to be completed on time." (Mairata, p.69). When he started, Spielberg did the same, and through a similarly meticulous planning method, he was able to accomplish even the most complex shots on a limited budget. Knowing his propensity for long takes and complex camera moves, it surprised me to learn Spielberg varied his coverage greatly depending on the project. Certain scenes would be staged with one flowing master shot (Ibid, p.69), whereas others would be covered in the traditional shot-reverse-shot arrangement (Ibid, p.80).

I learned that Spielberg actively seeks out the inner rhythm and feel of each film he is directing. His goal is to be style-less (Ibid, p.61). The only constant in his composition and staging is clarity (Ibid, p.84). In today's film climate, there seems to be a sharp divide between what Bordwell calls 'intensified continuity' (Ibid, p.69) and a slower cutting rate with less coverage. In other words, it's Michael Bay versus Michael Haneke. In my work, I once again looked to Spielberg and the rules of classical cinema, which espouse the importance of a clearly told narrative. With that, I devised a shot list that included both elaborate dolly shots with the more traditional coverage that studio filmmaking relies on.

i) Storyboard, Motionboard, and Going Overboard

Jumping off the previous section, I wanted to ensure that I got all the coverage I needed. However, I also did not want to waste time on shots that I would never use. During the planning

stage, I favoured the down-to-the-last-detail precision of an Alfred Hitchcock to the run-and-gun approach of a John Cassavetes. That way I was able to avoid unnecessary coverage by knowing exactly which shots I was able to get.

As I had done in previous projects, I drew up storyboards to correspond to each angle and scene in the script (see Appendix A). I was then encouraged by my supervisor to go further with this process. After completing the storyboards, I brought in the actors and recorded a full table read of the script. I then matched the storyboards to the audio and crafted a motionboard of the entire film. This enabled me to not only narrow down my shot list to its bare essentials, it also allowed every department on set to know the exact film we were making. Rather than explaining my vision for the film at length, I was able to show it.

On the night before shooting began, I gathered the entire cast and crew for a screening of the motionboard. My crude drawings drew some well-meaning chuckles, but more importantly, everyone understood the film that was being made. When shooting roughly five and a half pages per day (far above the average three per day), the motionboard proved to be an invaluable tool that I will implement in upcoming projects. However, the motionboard was not foolproof. What works in the drawing will not always translate to film. Certain shots that seemed unnecessary in the storyboard turned out to be essential for clarity and continuity. Thankfully, I had developed a strong relationship with my script supervisor, Tyler LePage, who I had worked with on all of my shorts up to and including *Daffodils*. Over time, I have learned to trust his input whenever he feels I am missing a specific shot. More often than not, he is right and I am glad I took his advice.

Any filmmaker, no matter the budget or the experience level, will say that the best laid plans are almost certainly going to change once the cameras roll. After all, nothing can predict a

power outage, a busted water main, or the actor succumbing to nerves and forgetting his lines in the process. These moments (all of which I have experienced) teach you that the unexpected is the only thing one can expect. Adaptability is key. Therefore, there is an inherent danger in relying on storyboards and shot lists. They create a sense of safety and control, but they also create an expectation that, if left unfulfilled can lead to lost time and effort. When things went wrong on set; when we were forced to make snap decisions based on unforeseen circumstances, I used the storyboards not as a crutch, but as a jumping off point. There are filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino who eschew storyboards altogether, fearing that they will lose spontaneity, but in my case, I learned I was only able to be spontaneous through such meticulous planning.

j) A Real-Time Good Time

When I transitioned from theatre to film, I wanted my thesis to retain the qualities I had acquired on stage. In this respect, *Daffodils* functions much like a one-act play and was born from my fascination with real-time single-setting stories. These pressure cooker scenarios trap the characters in a predicament of mounting tension from which they cannot or will not escape. Films like *Locke* (2013), *Le dîner de* cons (1998) and *Cube* (1997) prove that the conceit exists across a myriad of genres. They work as exciting, high-wire acts for the audience and challenge the filmmakers to sustain tension in real time. These single-setting stories live or die on the strength of their location. After all, when the audience is stuck in the same place for the entire play, they best enjoy being there. The joy of a single-setting story lies in the viewer becoming co-occupants of the location. Luis Buñuel exhibits a brilliant sense of place in his 1962 masterpiece *The Exterminating Angel*, a film whose entire plot rests on the characters mysteriously unable to leave a party.

k) My Kingdom for a Home: On Location Scouting

Finding the right location for *Daffodils* was a huge challenge. It had to accomplish so much. Firstly, it was the film's only location. Secondly, the story revolved around two lower-income people stealing from a rich person. Class and social status thus became major themes, and the location had to show that disconnect. Furthermore, Barry, the homeowner and Martha's ex-boyfriend, is never seen or heard in the piece. Thus, I had to ensure that the location acted as a stand-in for this incredibly important but unseen character. The design, the artwork, the furniture all had to hint at Barry's personality, history and values. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the location had to be big enough to accommodate the kind of comedic beats that I had planned. If Frank and Martha had nowhere to hide, the audience would reject the premise outright; they would never suspend their disbelief. In short, the film would fail if the setting was not perfect. Yet, what surprised me was how my definition of "perfect" changed throughout the course of production.

In the early stages of location scouting, the film was set in an upscale Toronto apartment. Traditionally a staple of classic sitcoms, the "apartment" setting felt like the ideal projection of Martha's desires. She, a young urban upstart bent on escaping her lower-class lifestyle finds Barry, a wealthy businessman with his own condo in the big city. I felt the film touched on the realities of precarious labour, inadequate housing and ballooning rental costs across most of North America's large urban centers (Coxon). Plus, I could draw on these millennial anxieties and justify Martha's motivation for being with Barry. There was also an opportunity to satirize a common sitcom trope of what I call the "poor man's palace". Shows like *FRIENDS* and *Seinfeld* see their characters living in apartments whose luxuriousness far exceeds their income. From a production standpoint, these shows with their large casts and multi-camera setups would struggle

in a realistic setting and thus do not feel incongruous. In my case, I could use the lavish apartment setting as a character-defining trait justified by its very unattainability. In other words, I could have my cake and eat it too. The trick was finding an apartment that fit the bill.

Unfortunately, reality set in. Traditional location booking agencies were out of my price range. Airbnb proved to be a dead end. As for friends and family, I could not convince them vacate their homes for a four-day shoot. Life was imitating fiction. Thematically the apartment was perfect, but it became clear that if I was going to shoot in one, I'd either have to find more money or severely compromise my narrative vision. So, as a solution, I widened my field of vision, both creatively and geographically. In lieu of an apartment, I started considering the idea of a house. And that's when I found it. I obtained permission to shoot in my uncle's home just outside of Napanee, Ontario. At first, I resisted the notion. The home, while gorgeous and upscale, was an old colonial country house, a far cry from the yuppy urban lifestyle that I had originally envisioned for Barry. Then, I imagined a different Barry, one who could live in a home like this, and somehow the story still held up. I had my palace.

Location scouting became a major lesson in director's vision versus audience expectation. Unlike me, a viewer does not enter the theatre knowing what changed. They do not see the rewrites, the location scouts or the production meetings. Audiences are happy to give themselves over to a story as long as the means feel justified. To paraphrase Robert Rodriguez's canonical advice; I started building the story around what I had rather than what I didn't. So, I settled on my uncle's large country home, which was both the right choice practically, but thematically as well. It fit the original vision because the original vision was sturdy enough to adapt to new circumstances.

l) Dancing with Lightsabers: A Study in Choreography

With my uncle's home, I not only had my location, I also had lots of physical space for the film's final set piece. If anything, I had too much space. In the script, the sequence went like this: Martha would hide, Frank would concoct some charade and maneuver the oblivious Lloyd around the living room so that she could make her escape. On the page, the scene contained only a few key plot points. Physical actions were described in the script with as much detail as the lightsaber fight in *The Phantom Menace*. I recognised I was passing the buck off to future me, but I also trusted myself and the actors that we could devise a compelling and funny sequence during rehearsals. Even though I could not visualize it yet, I knew I wanted the scene would play out like a three-person dance. So, in rehearsals, I approached it in the same way, choreographing a specific set of moves that pushed story and character forward.

As I suspected, this proved to be the most difficult part to iron out in rehearsals. Neither I nor my actors were used to crafting a scene so reliant on sight-gags. To facilitate the process, I took reference photos of my uncle's home (see Appendix B), which I had thankfully locked prior to rehearsals. From there, I found a large empty space in Toronto where I recreated a mock version of the set (see Appendix C). Basic as it was, it proved immensely helpful for me, the actors and the cinematographer. What we could not anticipate in rehearsal was in matching action to camera movement. Once again, I was shedding my theatrical instincts, extending past the limited perspective of the proscenium arch and learning to embrace the near-endless potential of the lens. There is only so much that storyboards, rehearsals and shot lists can prepare for. Mock sets are fine, but certain decisions can only be made on the day. The loud unpredictable noises, the actor's demeanour that day, the way the light casts itself on the wall; all will dictate how and where the camera goes.

6. Production

There is a reason I make little to no mention of the actual shooting of the film. Simply put, there is not much to say. As is my usual process, most of the decision-making took place in pre-production. In the script phase, I got the tone down as precisely as possible. In pre-production, I created my motionboard and used rehearsals to modify the script to better accommodate the actors. However, once the cameras started to roll, I rarely deviated from the framework I had established.

There were certainly discoveries made during shooting. As I mentioned, working with improv actors on a meticulously designed film was difficult. In one instance early on in the shoot, we realized that my uncle had left with the only key to the front door. In a pivotal scene, we needed to see Frank unlocking that door. Seeing as none of knew how to actually pick a lock, we employed a new strategy. Instead of abandoning the scene, we shot it in two parts. First, we performed the dolly move toward the deadbolt. After landing the take, we locked off the camera and measured its exact placement. Once my uncle got back on the last day of shooting, we shot an insert of the deadbolt unlocking and, using the same measurements from the previous day, superimposed the two shots in post-production. Making a movie is always stressful, but relatively speaking, this went quite smoothly. Of course, this did not last once we transitioned into post-production.

7. Post-Production

The headaches began at the very beginning when I lost my editor. In the past, I would have carried on editing by myself. However, I was determined to collaborate with someone on my thesis. I did not want to continue working in a bubble. Even though I knew I would lose some control by collaborating, I needed to improve my ability to communicate my vision. It was a trade-off, but one I was keen to make. Unfortunately, once my editor fell through, I was out of time and could not find a suitable replacement. So, reluctantly, I decided to edit the initial cut myself.

After completing the assembly, I came across an editor (and fellow York student) by the name of Oleksiy Buyanov. Our sensibilities clicked and we proceeded to fine-tune the film as a team. Thinking I had everything in place, I was thrown another curve ball. Oleksiy and my committee challenged me to play with the rhythm of the performances. This terrified me more than anything. By the time I got my film into post-production, I no longer want to "discover" it Instead I wanted to guide the film toward what I visualized in my head. I knew the rhythm I was building towards, including the cadence and the timing of the actors' line deliveries. I did not want to reshape the film in the edit suite and lose the work I had put in during pre-production.

However, I also did not want to let fear be a deterrent to discovering hidden qualities in the film. So, I decided to open the film up to reinvention. Doing so helped me discover that editing is a lot like a character's behaviour; it needs to be properly motivated. Anything more is excess and should be cut. Then again, much like a character, excess can give a scene some flavour. According to Steven Spielberg, excess noise can be good. It may reveal the artifice of the scene (Mairata, p.95), but this 'noise' can also bring about a sense of style, a distinguishing trait that makes it memorable (Ibid, p.98). This was most evident in the dialogue, which had a

cadence and tempo unique to this fictional world. While I wanted the film to flow visually, I also wanted it flow sonically. When the characters speak, they cast a spell that draws people into the story. If I liken it to music, the dialogue in *Daffodils* acts more like a bass line than a melody, as present as room tone or the sound of traffic. To remove or change the notes could potentially disrupt the beat and cause the audience to disengage. Having the courage of my convictions was at times challenging. After all, there was always the chance I was wrong. Then I remembered Billy Wilder, who once said, "trust your own instincts. Your mistakes might as well be your own, instead of someone else's."

Conclusion

In the section titled Comedy: A Genre Without Honour, I spoke of my motivation for making a comedy. I discussed how difficult it was to make an audience laugh, how the simplest thing was often the hardest to pull off. I went into the film trying to make a pure comedy. I had Alan Dale's words about Charlie Chaplin sacrificing laughs for serious themes thundering in my head. I wouldn't fall prey to it, I thought. The laughs would be enough. Yet, looking at *Daffodils* now, I see I couldn't help but blend seriousness with humour. In the end, I couldn't be more pleased that I did. Whether one calls it farce, tragifarce, or dramedy, my goal morphed from simply getting laughs to telling this story as best I knew how. Initially, I wanted to deal with the aftermath of a breakup. Through all its permutations, I still believe that I did. Frank may be the protagonist, but Martha's breakup with Barry looms large over the story, representing the wedge between her and her family.

For the longest time, I struggled over who my protagonist should be. I assumed that the protagonist was the one I identified with most. It only took finishing the film to understand how wrong I was. Even though it is technically Frank's journey, I identify far more with Martha's side of the story. In spite of his heroics, Frank's motivations are straightforward; he is a man determined to never repeat the past, and it is this determination that extends to his entire family. Martha's motivations on the other hand are far messier. Whereas Frank has carved himself out a balanced life, Martha is still struggling with the responsibilities and expectations of adulthood. Her arc is more resonant for me because I'm currently living it. To paraphrase Ari Aster's description of his own film *Midsommar*: the funny thing about breakups is how to the world they're benign, but to the two people living through them, they're cataclysmic (Film at Lincoln Centre). Martha's problems may appear small, but in her mind, they are colossal, and as a result

her reactions are cosmically overblown. This dichotomy is hilarious, heartbreaking and inimitably relatable for me. I wanted to explore my own psyche through her, to find out how outlandish my behaviour could get when the heartbreak is potent enough.

However, I did not want to stop at heartbreak; I wanted to give audiences a cathartic experience. Frank accepts that he will never give up on his sister, no matter what she puts him through. Martha, meanwhile, realizes that she cannot keep running away from her family. She can begin a journey of healing through their support. In many ways, I want to show that family and healing are similar; they both require work and never move in a straight line. Life, as Arnold Wesker claims, "comes too multifaceted to make a fetish of only one aspect of it." (p.104) It comes packed with an absurd blend of emotions, shifting from comedic to tragic in the blink of an eye. Frank and Martha's story is ultimately one of second chances, the true value of sacrifice and the importance of personal responsibility. I wanted to show how family can be both our greatest ally and our worst enemy. Much like Frasier and Niles, they may drive us crazy, they may exhaust us, but when the bond is strong, it's worth the effort. It is my sincere hope that when the credits roll, the viewer sees their own family in these characters, however they choose to define it for themselves.

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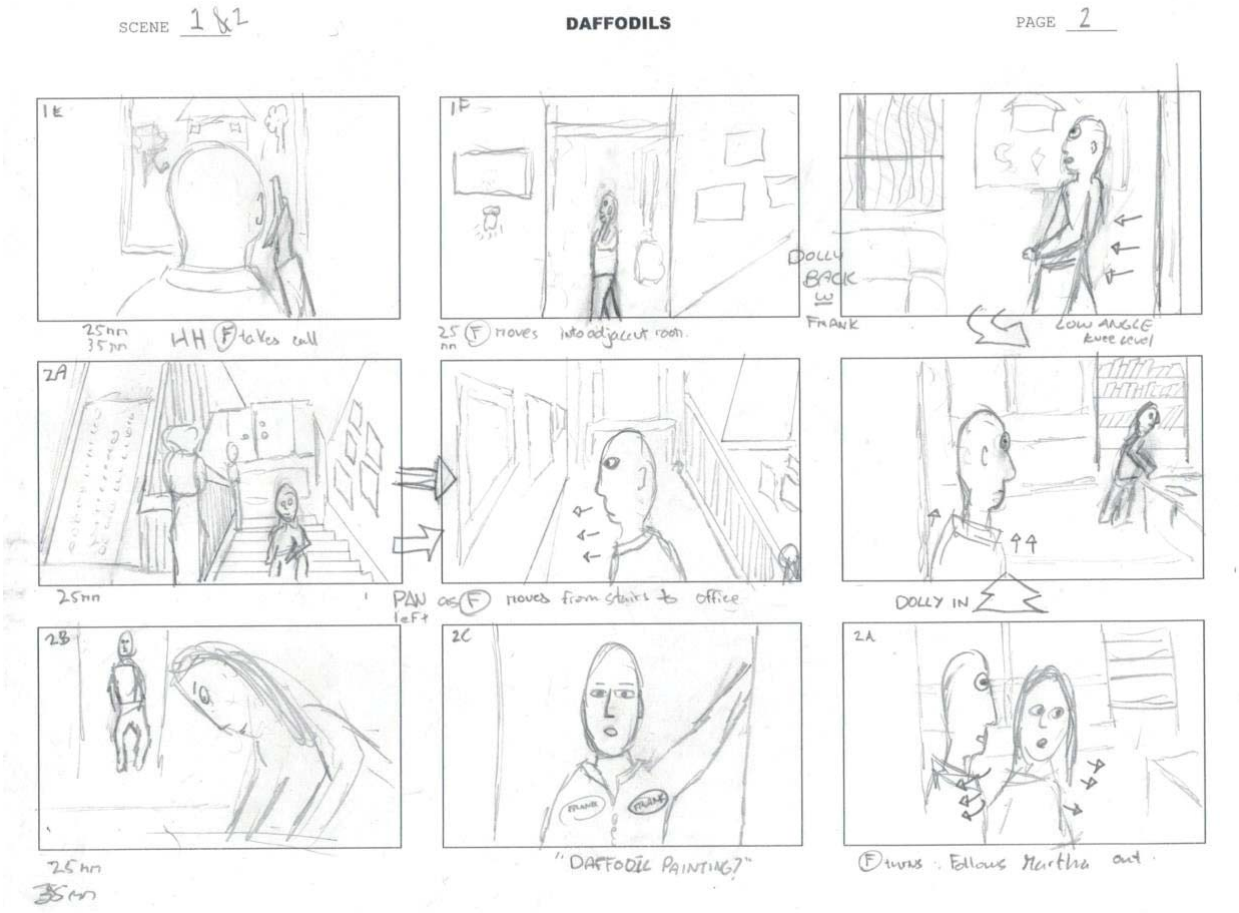
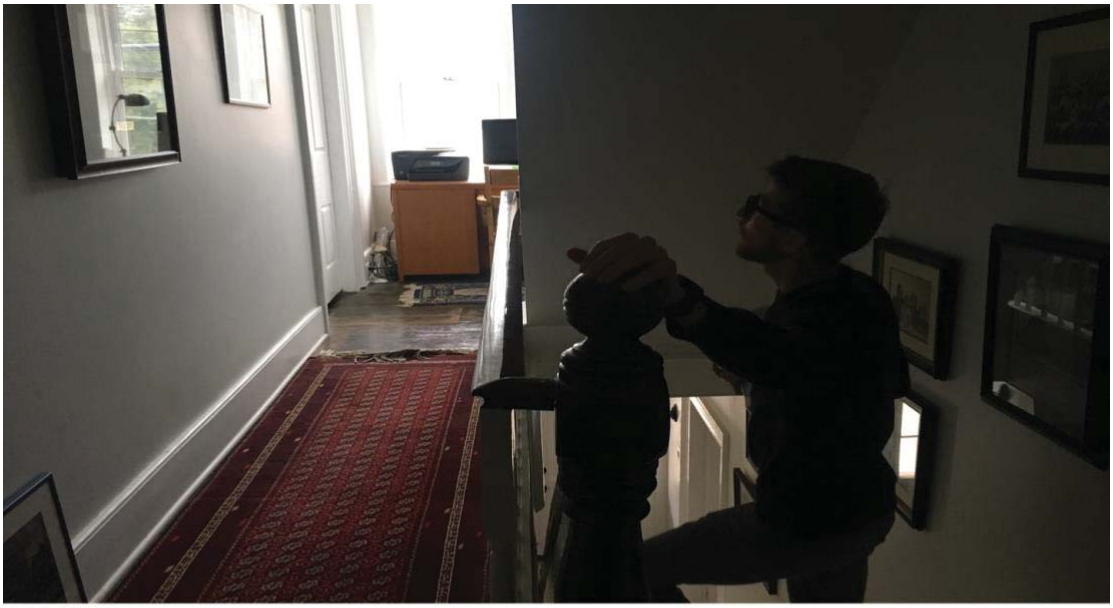
Appendices

Appendix A: Storyboards – Second half of scene 01



Appendix B: Scouting vs. Final Edit



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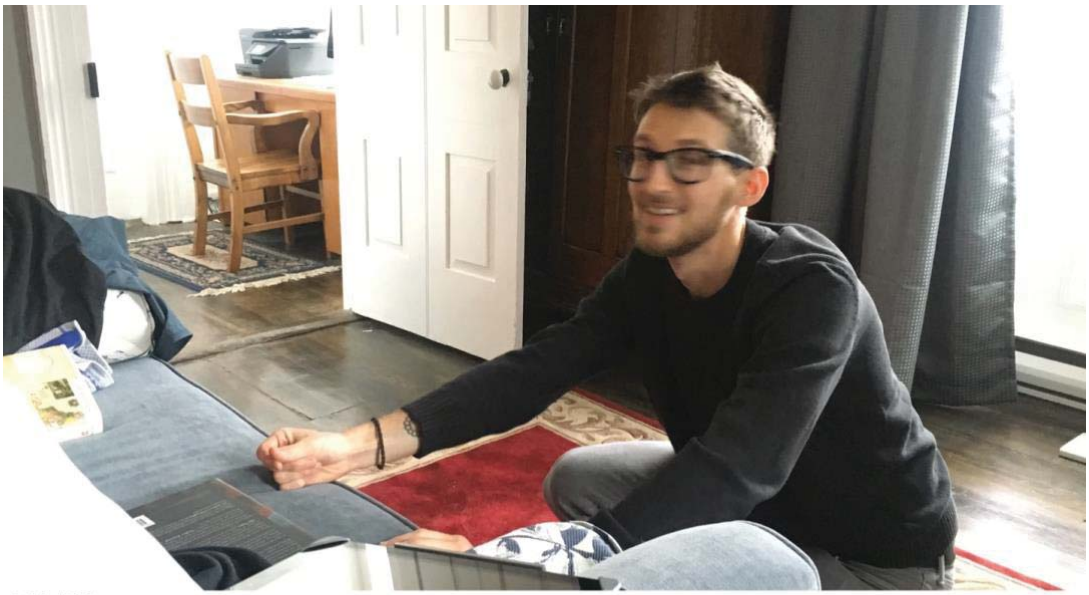
18 mm



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Appendix C: Rehearsals at York University (using mock set)